DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 261 444 CS 505 062

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TITLE Gender and Relationship Maintenance Strategies.
PUB DATE Oct 84
NOTE 26p.; Paper presented at the Annual Communication, Language and Gender Conference (7th, Oxford, OH, October 14-16, 1984).
PUB TYPE Speeches/Conference Papers (150) -- Viewpoints (120) -- Information Analyses (070)

EDRS PRICE MF01/PC02 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS *Behavior Patterns; Communication Research; Interaction; *Interpersonal Communication; *Interpersonal Relationship; Psychological Patterns; *Self Disclosure (Individuals); *Sex Differences; Sex Role; *Sexuality; Speech Communication

ABSTRACT

Although inconsistent, research findings indicate that men and women self-disclose differently in terms of depth and frequency and interpret disclosures differently during varying stages of their relationships. A review of the literature concerning communication within stable, enduring relationships reveals that, overall, there are no apparent sex differences that account for how men and women stabilize relationships. Inconsistent findings indicate that there are few, if any, psychological gender differences in relationship maintenance communication. However, the sex composition of the dyad seems to affect the nature of communication between partners. For example, developing and de-escalating opposite-sex relationships seem to involve higher risks and greater levels of uncertainty than developing and de-escalating stable or single-sex relationships. In addition, the relationship stage, rather than gender, seems to affect the evaluative nature of verbal interaction between partners. Based on these findings, it is difficult to discern main effects for sex or even psychological gender when examining strategies used to stabilize interpersonal relationships. Risk and uncertainty levels, partner intentions, relationship stage and type, attributions, and relational expectations have greater impact on the communication behaviors individuals use to maintain relationships. (HOD)

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Relationship Maintenance Strategies

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Paper presented at the Seventh Annual Communication, Language and Gender Conference, Miami University, Oxford, OH, October, 1984.

CS 505 062

"Gender and Relationship Maintenance Strategies"

Traditionally, the self-disclosure concept served as the foundation for the study of relational communication, particularly in the examination of gender differences in developing intimate relationships. Many of the studies conducted in the area of dyadic communication and relationship development have used "self-disclosure" as an index to determine how men and women regulate the escalation and de-escalation of relationships. Although inconsistent, findings indicate that men and women self-disclose differently in terms of depth and frequency and interpret disclosures differently during varying stages of their relationships (Cline, 1983).

Extensive research has been conducted on gender and self-disclosure in developing intimate relationships; however, few studies have investigated gender differences with regard to relationship stabilization and maintenance. Delia (1980) suggested that researchers should "re-evaluate the utility of the 'self-disclosure' concept as a foundation for the study of relational communication" (p. 97). It is necessary to focus on alternative procedures for the investigation of perceptions, intentions, and communication of expectations in stable relationships.

This paper will review the most current literature on communication within enduring relationships and will focus on maintenance and control strategies, the process of relationship definition and stabilization, and various other influences in stable relationships. Thorough examination of these studies will attempt to determine if males and females differ in their use of communication strategies to stabilize, define, and maintain interpersonal relationships.

Several researchers recognize the need for more study in the area of relationship maintenance stabilization. Ayres (1983) points out that a considerable amount of information is available about communication patterns in developing relationships, and recently more studies have focused on deteriorating relationships, but very little is known about the process of communication in stable relationships. Stability does not imply absence of change within a relationship but rather indicates that basic exchange patterns are established and accepted.

Knapp (1978) and Wilmot (1980) have revealed the importance of understanding the stabilization process in relationships. Although Knapp's model of relationship stages focuses on the developmental process of relationships, Knapp reveals that movement occurs within each stage in order to establish a balance within that stage. Wilmot interprets this as meaning that "partners work to stabilize their relationships at a given level and then still experience minor alternations within the relationship" (p. 152). Wilmot also conceptualizes three aspects of stable relationships: (1) Relationships stabilize because the partners reach some minimal agreement (usually implicitly) on what they want from the relationship; (2) Relationships can stabilize at differing levels of intimacy; and (3) a stabilized relationship still has areas of change occurring in it (p. 152).

Researchers have used various means to examine how partners reach agreement on relationship expectations or intimacy level. Traditionally, self-disclosure has been a major measure for determining how men and women maintain or change intimacy levels within a relationship. The most current research on self-disclosure reveals that as intimacy decreased, reported self-disclosure breadth decreased while depth of disclosure and use of negative statements increased (Tolstedt & Stokes, 1984). These

results indicate that despite declining intimacy levels in a relationship, partners continue to discuss highly personal content and share judgments, evaluations, and negative feelings. The authors suggest that in deteriorating relationships, the partners feel there's nothing to lose by disclosing negative feelings and evaluations. There were no significant differences for sex of partner.

Cline (1983) found significant effects for sex of respondent and partner in intimate self-disclosure. Self-reports indicated the most intimate disclosure occurred in male-male dyads, followed by male-female dyads. The least intimate disclosure was reported for females with female partners. However, when behavioral intimacy was assessed, results revealed that females disclosed more intimate information than did males. Despite discrepencies between self-reports and behavioral observations, these results indicated that females' reports of self-disclosure corresponded more closely with their actual behavior than did the males' self-reports. Cline explained that males may tend to overestimate their performance level and thus concluded that actual differences in the intimacy of disclosure between males and females may be slight. Cline suggests that "future research ought to focus on the interpretations or perceptions of the disclosure in conjunction with the actual behaviors" (p. 17).

Other studies included in this paper will address the issue of interpreting each partner's intentions and perceptions about the relationship and the influence these interpretations have on the communication behaviors employed to stabilize the relationship. As discussed earlier, Delia (1980) emphasized the need for expanding well beyond the self-disclosure concept when studying relationships. More specifically, Ayres (1983) suggested that study in this area requires differentiating relationship types, examining relationship intent, and investigating the impact of interactant's gender

in stable relationships. Ayres explored this area by determining if those in same-sex or opposite-sex dyads employ different communication strategies to stabilize relationships.

Ayres isolated three types of maintenance strategies used in relationships. The first was Avoidance which concerned ignoring things the other partner might do to change the relationsnip or avoiding doing things that would alter the relationship trajectory. The second type of strategy was Balance which meant keeping the number of favors and the emotional support levels constant. Directness, the third strategy employed, referred to directly stating preferences for maintaining the relationship at its present level.

Males and females did not differ in their use of these maintenance strategies. Rather, relationship intent of partner significantly affected the choice of a specific strategy. When one partner wanted to develop the relationship, the partner who desired stability directly stated he/she wanted to keep the relationship stable. In this situation, the partner also employed avoidance tactics. When one partner wanted the relationship to deteriorate, he/she who wanted to maintain the relationship at its present level used more balance strategies. Ayres asserts that balance strategies are less threatenting and imply that things are really fine as is. Ignoring the situation would not be effective, and directly stating expectations may incite rapid termination. Those who perceived their mate as also wanting to keep the relationship stable used a combination of all three strategies. Thus, partner intent rather than sex was the major factor in determining the selection of a particular maintenance strategy.

Researchers have examined various other strategies for maintaining relationships including message and compliance gaining strategies. The

message strategies individuals choose to employ in compliance gaining situations indicate how they maintain stability or effect changes in their personal relations (Cody, McLaughlin, & Schneider, 1981). These researchers contend that two important determinants of strategy selection are relational consequences and intimacy. Therefore, it is important to include studies of compliance gaining messages to further the understanding of relational stability.

Cody, McLaughlin, and Schneider (1981) identified four broad areas of compliance gaining activity: Personal rejection, justification, exchange, and manipulation. Personal rejection strategies are those in which one person threatens the other with negative consequences if compliance is denied. Justification strategies include reason, altruism, and politeness. Exchange strategies are those which include promises, debt and compromise. Manipulation strategies are those which use flattery, hinting, and deceit.

In this study, intimacy level and desire to maintain, escalate, or de-escalate a relationship were found to affect strategy selection. Justification strategies were more likely to be used in intimate contexts where relationship goals are important. These strategies were also rated higher in short-term consequences situations as compared to long-term consequences situations because the future definition of the relationship could change for the better or worse, making outcomes difficult to predict.

Because exchange strategies involve less relational risk than other types of strategies, they were more preferred in intimate relationships than in nonintimate relationships. Exchange strategies were less preferred in long-term consequences situations where "relational outcomes are more difficult to predict and where exchange strategies involve the risk

of being committed to an exchange agreement" in a relationship with a unclear future (Cody, McLaughlin, & Schneider, 1981, p. 104). Thus, exchange strategies are preferred in situations where relational outcomes are predictable and in short-term intimate situations with little risk.

Manipulation strategies were slightly more preferred in nonintimate rather than in intimate relationships where relational goals are more important. These strategies were also preferred in situations with short-term consequences where relational outcomes are less ambiguous. Therefore, it appears that strategy choice may be affected greatly by the amount of risk involved in the implementation of a particular strategy. Perhaps less risk may be associated with stable relationships as compared to developing or deteriorating relationships, thus individuals may be more likely to use justification strategies in situations where relationship maintenance is desirable.

Researchers have also examined compliance gaining strategies in terms of relational power, sex, and gender type. Falbo and Peplau (1980) identified two dimensions along which power strategies vary. The first dimension, directness, ranged from directly talking to the target about the desired goal to hinting and putting the target in a good mood. The bilateral dimension referred to the use of persuasion and reason vs. doing what one wants without explanation or justification, which is classified as a unilateral strategy.

Males were more likely to report using bilateral and direct strategies, while females used unilateral and indirect strategies. Falbo and Peplau (1980) concluded that men perceive themselves as having greater power than their intimate partner and thus influence their partner from a position of strength. Whereas women, operating from a subordinate position, anticipate noncompliance and therefore use more unilateral strategies.

Using this earlier model, Falbo (1982) examined the relationship between four sex-role types--masculine, feminine, androgynous, and undifferentiated--and various power strategies used in intimate relationships. This study revealed significant sex-role differences for specific strategies employed. Androgynous and masculine persons were more likely to use bilateral and direct strategies, while undifferentiated and feminine persons were more likely to use indirect and unilateral strategies.

These results are consistent with other findings concerning the balance of power in intimate relationships. Persons who perceived themselves as having more power in their relationships tended to use more direct, bilateral strategies, while those who felt less powerful in their relationships used more subtle, indirect strategies. From this, we may conclude that sex-roles may be linked with the perceptions of power and control exhibited in intimate relationships, and sex-role rather than sex may be a major determinant of strategy selection.

In order to further our understanding of gender and the communication process in stable relationships, researchers have studied verbal interaction with regard to relationship stage or level of growth and sex-composition of dyad. Specifically, Ayres (1980) examined the influences of relationship stage and dyad sex composition on content elaboration patterns. Content elaboration refers to the amount of detail used to develop a point in a discussion. Ayres found that as relationships stabilize, content elaboration remains constant.

These results also revealed that relationship stage, rather than gender, impacted upon the dyad's communication patterns. Male/female dyads in developing relationships employed significantly more direct shifts and more abrupt initiations than did stable male/female dyads.

In growing or developing relationships, opposite-sex dyads used more abrupt initiations and direct shifts than did same-sex dyads. Developing male/male dyads used fewer direct shifts and abrupt initiations than did stable male/male dyads. Ayres attributed this to male avoidance of who will control the exchange process.

Ayres suggested that male/female interactions in developing relationships may involve greater risks and uncertainty levels; therefore, using more abrupt changes and topic shifts may be ways to avoid "overcommitment." Numerous changes in conversations do not allow for great elaboration and topic depth characteristic of higher intimacy levels. There are more risks involved in developing relationships as compared to stable relationships, thus the tendency to shift topics is more prevalent in developing dyads.

Ayres' (1980) findings on topics dwell time concur with Cody, McLaughlin, and Schneider's (1981) research on the influence of risk on selection of persuasion tactics in stable and developing relationships. These findings also support the risk analysis conducted in gender, self-disclosure, and intimacy studies.

Baxter and Wilmot (1983) examined how communication characteristics of relationships with differential growth rates vary with sex of respondent. Analyzing partners' diary entries on topics discussed, importance of encounter, and perceived effects of encounter on the relationship, Baxter and Wilmot found significant differences. In no-growth relationships, females perceived encounters to be significantly more important than did males; however, there were no sex differences in high- or low-growth relationships. Overall, females reported more personalized communication and greater topic breadth than did males.

Baxter and Wilmot attribute these results to several factors. First, the greater personalness associated with females confirms their socialized expressiveness. Since females typically attach greater importance to relationships, they may have monitored the relationships more closely than did males. The greater topic breadth engaged in by females in this study is explained by Fishman's observations that females assume more responsibility than do males for conversations running smoothly. However, this conclusion assumes conversations are isolated events and ignores many important contextual and relational factors. It is also important to note that many of relationships labeled as "no-growth" were in the process of terminating. The authors contended that the potential loss of those disengaging relationships may have heightened their importance more for females than for males.

Although relationship growth level did not significantly affect verbal interaction in the previous study, Ayres' (1982) findings indicate that the evaluative nature of communication seems to be more of a function of relationship stage rather than sex. Ayres (1982) examined how the use of evaluative statement varies across relationship stages and how these statements are perceived in same-sex vs. opposite-sex relationships.

Ayres found that as relationships developed, individuals indicated they perceived themselves as increasing their use of evaluative statements (person offers own opinion) as compared to descriptive comments (person offers no opinion). Those in stable relationships reported their use of evaluative and descriptive comments as remaining relatively constant. In deteriorating relationships, individuals reported the greatest decrease in evaluative statements, the next decrease in descriptive statements, and the least amount of decrease in evaluative-other comments (person offers

opinion about partner's statement). Ayres contends that in order to disengage, an individual may withold his or her own opinions but continue to evaluate his or her partner's opinions. This increase in evaluative-other statements concurs with the Tolstedt and Stokes (1984) findings on the evaluative nature of the information disclosed by partners in deteriorating relationships.

No significant interactions were found for sex and relationship, nor were any main effects found for sex. Partners in same-sex dyads used no more evaluative statements than those in opposite-sex dyads. Ayres concluded that relationship stage has more impact on the communication behavior between interactants than does the sex of the partner.

A thorough investigation of sex and gender differences in stable relationships must include the examination of how partners define and share perceptions about the relationship. Analysis of the strategies used to increase understanding between partners and to convey relational expectations may consider many variables that were not studied previously.

Wood (1982) discusses several problems inherent in the current developmental view of communication in relationships by emphasizing the "currently inadequate understanding of the role of communication in relational definition" (p. 75). In order to fill this void, Wood elaborates on the concept of "relational cultures" where partners' talk serves to define themselves and their relationship. This relational culture "serves as the nucleus of a relationship by providing to partners a shared universe of discourse and definition in matters deemed important by the partners" (Wood, 1982, p. 76). To further explain this concept, Wood discusses twelve relationship states, emphasizing the importance of state seven,

Navigating Communication, which serves to maintain a standard level of performance. This is the most extended stage of long-term bonds and involves the numerous and continuous adjustments made in stabilized relationships.

Important in this relational culture view of relationship definition and maintenance is the individual's frame of reference which includes his/her ideals and conceptions about relationships. Several researchers have studied how men and women differ in what they consider as important in romantic relationships and friendships.

Morais and Tan (1980) investigated what men and women consider to be the ideal romantic love relationship. Specifically, considerations of how wives, husbands, girlfriends, and boyfriends should behave toward one another were studied. Significant sex differences were found where males desire less independence than women were willing to grant them, and women wanted men to respect women's independence more than men wanted women to respect theirs. Women felt that females should be less dependent upon their partner than men thought females should be. Females also felt men should display more warmth and less idealization of women than the males thought was appropriate. Both males and females felt their opposite-sex partner should exhibit more sensitivity.

The authors concluded that men hold a more traditional view of the ideal romantic love relationship than did women. Where men wanted women who were more absorbed and dependent, women preferred more independence for both partners. Morais and Tan contend that there is a delay in men coming to terms with changing economic and personal roles. Thus, this study attempted to attribute sex differences to changing cultural norms. Perhaps more current study of these variables would yield different results in light of changing norms.

Ashton (1980) examined sex-differences with regard to the importance of 21 factors affecting friendship including shared activities, emotional expression, intimacy level, stability of relationship, commitment, and physical attractiveness. Physical attractiveness was more important for opposite-sex relationships than for same-sex relationships. Females rated "boosting each other's egos" as more important than did males. Both men and women rated stability of relationship as more important for friendships with a male than for friendships with a female. No sex differences were found for ther other variables which included intimacy level, commitment, and self-disclosure.

Ashton pointed out that the current study's results on gender differences on the stability variable are inconsistent with other findings concerning intensiveness in female friendships. However, the lack of differences between male and female ratings on the importance of self-disclosure, intimacy, and ability to communicate reveals that there are few gender differences for the intensiveness of best-friend relationships. Perhaps these areas are so central to the maintenance of a relationship that both partners consider them important.

Despite the equal weight each gender gave these communication behaviors in this study, other findings have revealed that actual behaviors in these areas may differ between the sexes. These discrepencies between perceived importance of several factors and actual behavior may be a cause for conflict or misunderstanding. Researchers have tried to isolate sex differences in terms of biological and affectional needs in relationships. It is necessary to determine if need differences exist and how they may affect the communication and fulfillment of expectations in the relationship.

McCabe and Collins (1979) examined how males and females vary in their approach to dating depending upon the particular sex-roles they adopt. After determining males' and females' psychobiological and psychoaffectional orientation, these researchers found no significant sex-role differences in stable relationships. Instead, relationship stage had more impact on each partner's needs and desires. While males, masculine and androgynous individuals adopted a more biological orientation (desiring physical/sexual contact) than did females and feminine individuals during initial interactions, once the relationship had stabilized there were no sex or sex-role differences. Feminine and androgynous females desired greater affectional involvement than did masculine males on the first date; however, as relationship depth increased, there were no significant differences in affectional scores between individuals with different sex-roles.

Thus in stable relationships, both men and women as well as masculine, feminine, and androgynous individuals showed similar affectional and psychobiological desires. Other variables such as relationship stage or depth interact with gender and affect the amount of affection and sexual contact desired in a relationship.

After examining how orientations, wants, and expectations may affect the communication used to maintain relationships, it is necessary to discuss how these expectations are conveyed. Wood (1982) pointed out how communication between partners was used to structure reality and the relational culture. She also explained that clarification and revision of rules and roles facilitate the relationship maintenance process. By validating the metacommunication functions of talk about past partners (Tapp), Newman (1982) revealed a unique way in which partners clarify

rules and roles in their current relationships. Newman found that many individuals use discussion of their relationship history as a means of self-disclosure. Tapp also serves a metacommunication function by providing relational definitions which "structure, constrain, or shape the current relationship system" (Newman, 1982, p. 25).

Tapp is also used to create emotional distance or closeness in current relationships. Newman suggests that when Tapp is used to intentionally create emotional strain, it serves to alienate or threaten the current partner. This use may also be considered a type of power strategy to gain compliance from the partner or to gain more control in the relationship. Alternatively, Tapp may foster closeness when it communicates a symbolic rejection of the ex-partner. The final function of Tapp is confirmation of the user's self-image by revealing his or her own good qualities through the discussion of the ex-partner's positive feelings about the Tapp user.

Newman did not consider gender effects nor who would be more likely to use Tapp. Depending on its use, Tapp may be classified as a direct or indirect communication strategy. Further investigation of this area may yield interesting results on the techniques used to structure, define, or stabilize relationships. It is certain that talk about past partners (Tapp) serves vital metacommunication functions necessary for maintaining enduring relationships.

Knapp, Ellis, and Williams' (1980) examination of relationship definitions and the structuring of perceptions concurs with Wood's approach to understanding relational communication. These researchers based their study on the premise that labels used to describe our relationships with others play a major role in the way individuals structure

expectations and develop perceptual orientations within a particular relationship. Knapp, Ellis, and Williams considered eight relational dimensions of intereaction and examined "the extent to which statements about specific communication behavior reflecting these dimensions were associated with words used to identify relationships at various stages of intimacy" (p. 267). Dimensions of uniqueness, depth, breadth, difficulty, flexibility, spontaneity, smoothness, and evaluation were clustered under three factors. The personal communication factor concerned intimacy and closeness; synchronized communication referred to interactions that were smooth and coordinated; and difficult communication was characterized by strained or awkward interactions.

Significant sex differences were found for the first two dimensions. Both males and females perceived relationships with females in a more personal way. The authors contend that this is evident because women have been found to be more willing to self-disclose. Men and women perceived opposite-sex relationships as involving more personalized communication than same-sex relationships. Knapp, Ellis, and Williams explain this by noting that most common relationships between men and women are romantic, thus more "personalized." Same sex relationships were seen as more synchronous than were opposite-sex relationships. Synchronized communication was characterized by conversations which were smooth-flowing, effortless, spontaneous, and relaxed. Perhaps previous findings by Ayres (1980) on feelings of increased risk in opposite-sex relationships may be used to explain why these partners are less synchronized or relaxed with each other.

Fitzpatrick and Best (1979) expanded beyond the study of relational terms used to define relationships by taking a typological approach which

"presupposes a limited number of discrete, recurring patterns of ongoing relationships" (p. 168). These researchers studied how partner agreement on relational definition and dyadic adjustment (happiness and stability) vary across four relationship types.

The Independent type relationship is characterized by partners who are change-oriented and autonomous yet share and engage in some conflict. The Separates type is defined by greater conflict avoidance, more differentiated space, and little sharing between partners. Partners in the Traditional relationship adhere to a traditional belief system and daily time schedules. There are few emotional and physical boundaries between partners and very little autonomy for each. In the Separate/Traditional relationship, the husband classifies himself as a Separate while the wife sees herself as a Traditional.

Fitzpatrick and Best found that Traditionals and Independents were similar in perceptions about the quality and frequency of communication in their relationship. Partners in these two types also express feelings to each other and reciprocate disclosures; separates were unexpressive. Findings also revealed that Traditionals rated significantly higher than did the other three couple types on consensus, level of agreement on certain issues; cohesion, frequency of partners engaging in outside interests together; affection, frequency of sexual relations and demonstrations of affection; and satisfaction, how happy partners are in their relationship. Independents were lower on consensus, satisfaction, and affection, while Separates were lower in cohesion. Separate/Traditional couples showed little consensus, moderate cohesion, high satisfaction, and a good deal of affection.

Couples who agreed on their relationship definition had high agree-

ment (consensus) and were slightly more cohesive than couples who disagreed on their relationship definition. However, those partners who disagreed on the definition of their relationship expressed significantly more affection toward each other. These findings indicate that relationship type is an important factor in determining agreement, affection, and cohesion between partners in enduring relationships.

Investigating agreement on salient relational issues may also give more insight into how partners in stable relationships communicate. Sillars, Pike, Jones, and Murphy (1984) examined sources used to establish understanding in marriage and how these sources determined mutual agreement between partners. Partner responses to questions on conflict situations in marriage were compared to determine actual agreement, perceived agreement, and raw understanding between mates. These researchers found that perceived agreement on salient issues was much stronger than actual agreement for both husbands and wives. Both spouses relied heavily on their own feelings for estimating their partner's feelings. These results also revealed that a spouse's understanding of partner was greater when the partner was less neutral and more negative. Understanding was also greater when partners used more direct and indirect distributive acts including criticism, demands, threats, and hostile questions.

This research indicates that individuals often interpret their partner's feelings based upon how they themselves feel. Findings on the use of negative statements concur with Ayres' (1982) findings on the use of evaluative statements in enduring relationships. This study's results are also consistent with some conclusions in self-disclosure research which reveal that negative disclosive statements increase with intimacy level.

The conclusions drawn by Fitzpatrick and Best (1979) and Sillars, Pike, Jones, and Murphy (1984) reveal that communication in enduring relationships may be more affected by relationship type and mutuality of relational definitions than by gender. Perhaps each relationship type my be characterized by partners who espouse a particular sex-role. If these sex-roles of each partner affect the couple's definition of their relationship type, then psychological gender may indirectly impact upon relational definitions. More studies should focus on the sex-role composition of each relationship type.

A few researchers have attempted to include sex-role measures in their studies of relationship definition and perception. Hill, Peplau, and Rubin (1981) examined the concept of perceptual agreement in relationships by considering the sources and impact of differing perceptions and their link to gender. This study investigated partners' backgrounds, attitudes, dating relationships, and sex-role. Results revealed no significant sex differences for perceptions of involvement, power, and self-disclosure. Overall, both men and women attributed greater relationship involvement to the partner and greater power and disclosure to the self. Couples low in self-disclosure were more likely to disagree on how close or intimate the relationship was. Analysis on the effects of perceptual disagreement revealed that relationship dissolution was correlated with greater disagreement on several subjective intimacy measures such as closeness and relative involvement.

Hill, Peplau, and Rubin (1981) contend that differences in perceptions of power may related more to the desire to protect on's self-esteem rather than to gender influences. These conclusions do not concur with those of Falbo (1982) which revealed gender effects on perceptions of power where

males perceived themselves as having more power in the relationship. The authors also suggest that perceptions of greater self-disclosure by one's self as compared to disclosure by one's partner may actually result from the lack of information about which the partner chose to self-disclose. This supports Cline's (1983) findings on the discrepencies between reported self-disclosure and actual behavior.

Many other variables may intervene which affect the perceptions of one's self, partner, and the relationship. Examination of self-partner attributional biases may give more insight on the factors affecting perceptual agreement in relationships. Newman (1981) discusses the use of interpersonal attributions for examining ongoing, intimate relationships. Interpersonal attributions reflect expectations and intentions about one's self in relation to another. Newman stresses that conflict often arises in relationships when partners attempt ot explain their mate's behavior interpersonally rather than situationally or dispositionally. Dispositional factors include the partner's attitudes, values, and abilities. Situational factors refer to influences residing outside of the relationship. Inaccurate attributions of communication behavior may change an intrapersonal problem into an interpersonal issue.

Attributions may also reflect changing definitions and stages of the relationship. During the initial relationship stages, positive-dispositional attributions are stressed; as the relationship progresses, interpersonal attributions may become more salient. According to Newman (1981), often individuals "seeking attributions for their own emotional responses will look at their partner's contributions to that reaction" (p. 64). This way of viewing emotional responses interpersonally rather than intrapersonally may contribute to relationship dissatisfaction.

One partner is essentially blaming the other partner for his or her emotional state.

Several of these observations on attributions are consistent with the findings of Sillars, Pike, Jones, and Murphy (1984) on how married partners intrepret their emotional responses to various situations. Further research should examine changes in attributions types during the course of the relationship and when and how attributions initially arise. Studies should also examine if gender impacts on the type of attribution made.

Based on this review of literature concerning communication within stable, enduring relationships, several conclusions may be drawn with regard to gender differences in relationship definition and maintenance strategies. Overall, there are no apparent sex differences that account for how men and women stabilize relationships. Inconsistent findings on sex-roles and maintenance strategies also indicate that there are few, if any, psychological gender differences in relationship maintenance communication.

However, the sex composition of the dyad seems to affect the nature of communication between partners. Greater differences were notes for opposite-sex dyads than for single-sex dyads, which may be attributed to several factors. First, developing and de-escalating opposite-sex relationships seem to involve higher risks and greater levels of uncertainty than do stable or single-sex relationships. In opposite-sex dyads, perceived levels of risk and uncertainty impacted the communication behavior of men and women equally. In situations classified as risky, both men and women used more abrupt changes and topic shifts in conversations. Second, fear of commitment seems to be an important factor in determining

how men and women will stabilize and maintain opposite-sex relationships. Findings indicate that both men and women are considtent in expressing fears of commitment and intimacy. Intimacy level of relationship, which has been found to be related to risk and uncertainty level, similarly affected the maintenance strategies used by women and men. This analysis may also explain why same-sex relationship are perceived as more synchronous and relaxed than are opposite-sex relationships.

Although sex-composition influences patterns of verbal interaction between partners, the nature of interaction is not significantly affected by sex composition of the dyad. Specifically, relationship stage, rather than gender, seems to affect the evaluative nature of verbal interaction between partners. In stable opposite-sex and same-sex relationships, there were no differences in how women and men used descriptive and evaluative statements. Evaluativeness was a function of relationship stage rather than gender. The research also revealed that while males' and females' affectional and biological needs varied across relationship stage, there were no significant gender differences once relationships had stabilized.

Studies of relationship definition and perceptual agreement between partners revealed no differences for sex or psychological gender. Both men and women attributed greater relationship involvement to the partner and greater power and disclosure to the self, thus any differences in perceptions related more to the desire to protect one's self-esteem rather than to gender influences.

Based on these findings, it is difficult to discern main effects for sex or even psychological gender when examining strategies used to stabilize interpersonal relationships. Risk and uncertainly level, partner intentions,

relationship stage and type, attributions and relational expectations have greater impact on which communication behaviors individuals will employ to maintain relationships. More attention should be given to the investigation of varying perceptions and attributions of communication behavior based upon differing expectations and definitions. Too many complex variables interact with each partner's sex-role orientation within a relationship to make a strong case for main effects of gender on the relationship stabilization and maintenance process.

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